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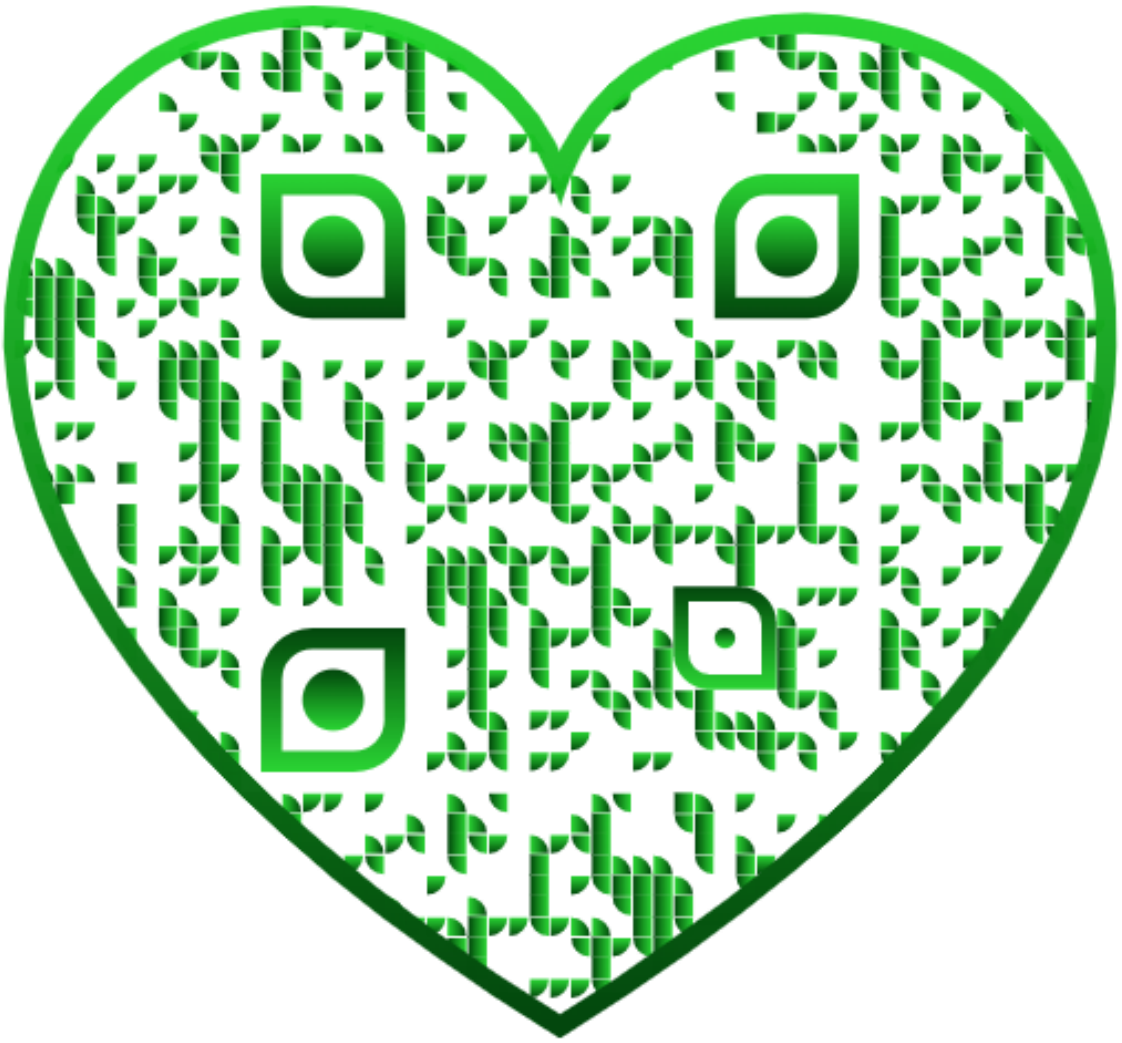
SETH

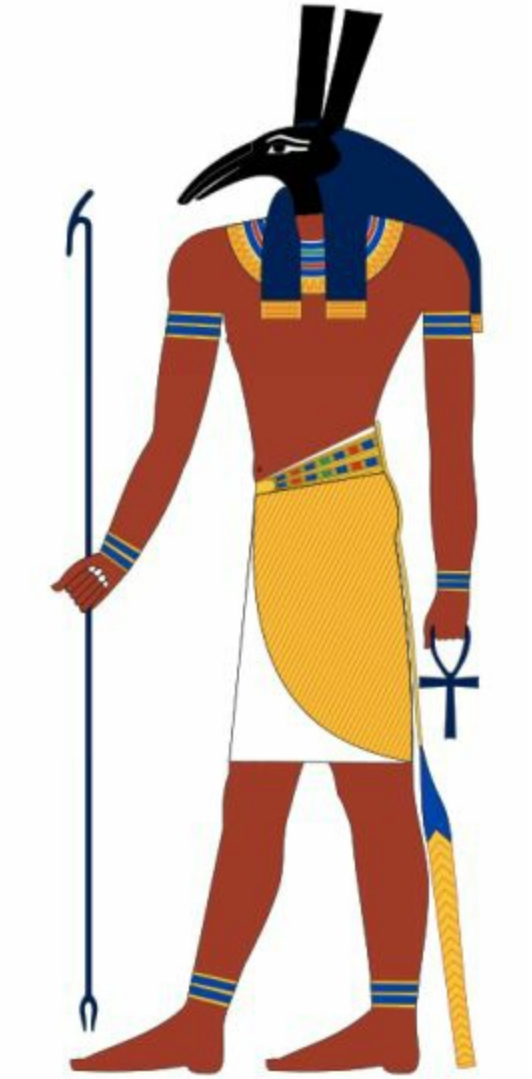
The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Killed Osiris to Usurp the Throne

MARKUS CARABAS



Seth: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Killed Osiris to Usurp the Throne

By Markus Carabas and Charles River Editors



Jeff Dahl's depiction of Seth

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Introduction

An Egyptian depiction of Horus spearing Seth, who's in the form of a hippopotamus

Seth

"On the third day Typhon [Seth] was born, but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt forth … For this reason the kings considered the third of the intercalated days as inauspicious, and transacted no business on that day, nor did they give any attention to their bodies until nightfall." - Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*

Africa may have given rise to the first human beings, and Egypt probably gave rise to the first great civilizations, which continue to fascinate modern societies across the globe nearly 5,000 years later. From the Library and

Lighthouse of Alexandria to the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Ancient Egyptians produced several wonders of the world, revolutionized architecture and construction, created some of the world's first systems of mathematics and medicine, and established language and art that spread across the known world. With world-famous leaders like King Tut and Cleopatra, it's no wonder that today's world has so many Egyptologists.

What makes the accomplishments of the Ancient Egyptians all the more remarkable is that Egypt was historically a place of great political turbulence. Its position made it both valuable and vulnerable to tribes across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Ancient Egypt had no shortage of its own internecine warfare. Its most famous conquerors would come from Europe, with Alexander the Great laying the groundwork for the Hellenic Ptolemy line and the Romans extinguishing that line after defeating Cleopatra and driving her to suicide.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Egyptian civilization was its inception from the ground up, as the ancient Egyptians had no prior civilization which they could use as a template. In fact, ancient Egypt itself became a template for the civilizations that followed. The Greeks and the Romans were so impressed with Egyptian culture that they often attributed many attributes of their own culture–usually erroneously–to the Egyptians. With that said, some minor elements of ancient Egyptian culture were, indeed, passed on to later civilizations. Egyptian statuary appears to have had an initial influence on the Greek version, and the ancient Egyptian language continued long after the pharaonic period in the form of the Coptic language.

Although the Egyptians may not have passed their civilization directly on to later peoples, the key elements that comprised Egyptian civilization, including their religion, early ideas of state, and art and architecture, can be found among other civilizations. For instance, civilizations far separated in time and space, such as China and Mesoamerica, possessed key elements that were similar to those found in ancient Egypt. Indeed, since Egyptian civilization represented some fundamental human concepts, a study of their culture can be useful when trying to understand many other pre-modern cultures.

To the ancient Egyptians, as was the case with any society made up of inquiring humans, the world was a confusing and often terrifying place of destruction, death and unexplained phenomena. In order to make sense of such an existence, they resorted to teleological stories. Giving a phenomenon

a story made it less horrifying, and it also helped them make sense of the world around them. Unsurprisingly, then, the ancient Egyptian gods permeated every aspect of existence.

In the first dynastic period there is a symbolic depiction of the earliest form of kingship. The symbol consisted of the "Two Ladies and Two Lords." The Ladies were the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjyt, who represented the Upper and Lower kingdoms of Egypt, each with her crown of either White or Red; the Two Lords were the conflicting gods Horus and Seth. The contention between these two gods was transmuted into real-world conflict when, during the Second Dynasty, king Peribsen chose to put the mysterious "Seth Animal" above his name, thus favoring one of the "Two Lords" over the other. Peribsen kept this close association with Seth, betraying the earlier kingly association with Horus, until king Khasekhemwy dethroned him and placed both gods" animals above his own name and declared "the Two Lords are at rest." The modern historian Geraldine Pinch suggests that this is a very early example of the Egyptians" tendency to mythologize their real-world conflicts, a trait the Egyptians would continue well into their long history.

It's true that the vast history of Egypt can only be given a cursory view at any one time, but, in the case of its myths, just enough to contextualize the story can be sufficient to understand the progression of a deity like Seth through the millennia. In fact, the development of Seth's character throughout history is possibly one of the most fascinating and divisive among the Egyptian deities. Beginning as one of the "Two Lords" Seth's pre-eminence among the gods continues well into the later dynasties as he never loses his place among the principal nine deities, known as the Ennead, despite his nefarious dealings with his brother, Osiris, his sister and sister-in-law, Isis, and his nephew, their son, Horus. At first glance it is easy to see how Seth came to be vilified as a kind of "demon" or "devil" but, with an understanding of the belief structure he was born out of, modern readers can see that this divisive god was much more complex than a mere "adversary."

Seth: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Killed Osiris to Usurp the Throne looks at the mythology surrounding one of antiquity's most famous deities. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Seth like never before.

Seth: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Killed Osiris to Usurp the Throne
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Note

The absolute dating of individual pharaohs has been a matter of long debate among Egyptologists, mostly due to the existence of several king lists that vary in the number of years they assign to each ruler.

The basic outline comes from Manetho, one of two priestly advisors to Ptolemy I (305-282 BCE). Manetho's *History* divides the pharaohs into 30 native dynasties and gives the number of years each ruler was on the throne, but no complete copy of Manetho's work exists.

Other king lists are also fragmentary. The Palermo Stone from Dynasty V (2498-2345 BCE) is a fairly complete list starting from the last Predynastic kings, but it sadly ends in the middle of Dynasty V. The Royal List of Karnak goes all the way to Tuthmosis III (1504-1450 BCE) and is especially useful in that it records many of the minor rulers of the Second Intermediate Period, when Egypt was divided into two or more states. The Royal List of Abydos skips these kings but runs all the way to the reign of Seti I (1291-1278 BCE). The Royal Canon of Turin is a badly damaged papyrus dating to around 1200 BCE that gives the precise length of reign of each ruler, often down to the day. Many portions of the list are missing, however.

Discoveries of other texts and radiocarbon dating have helped refine the dates, but there are still competing theories regarding the chronology, and all have both merits and problems. For the sake of consistency, this work uses the chronology set forth by Egyptologist Peter A. Clayton in his various works. The reader should note that while Clayton's chronology is a popular one, it is by no means universally accepted.

The Origins of Ancient Egyptian Mythology

Ancient Egypt spans a history of some 3,000 years, depending on how people want to divide it up. Many cultures, such as ancient Greece, divided their lengthy histories either according to cultural changes, such as the "Classical Era" beginning with the onset of democracy and ending with the death of Alexander the Great, or by following the reigns of each subsequent ruler. In ancient Egypt, the vast history was originally divided into dynasties. Living in the 3rd century BCE, the Egyptian priest Manetho divided history into 30 dynasties, which later Egyptologists have grouped into longer periods according to how much of what is considered Egypt today fell under the rule of each king. They are given as follows, according to Shaw's chronology:[1]

The Pharaonic Period

Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1-2) ca.3050-2660 BCE
Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6) ca. 2660-2190 BCE
First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 7-11)ca. 2190-2066 BCE
Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11-12) ca. 2066-1780 BCE
Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 13-17) ca. 1780-1549 BCE
New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20) ca. 1549-1069 BCE
Third Intermediate Period (21-25) ca. 1069-664 BCE
Late Period (Dynasties 26-31) ca. 664-332 BCE
The Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE
The Roman Period 30 BCE – 395 CE

In order to understand why modern scholars chose to divide history into longer periods of dynastic rule, it is necessary to understand the geography of Egypt's ruled dominions. The river that defined and dictated much of ancient people's lives and ideologies, the Nile, runs from south to north, with a sprawling delta in the north and more barren land to the south. This distinction is the reason for one of the most confusing aspects of Egyptian history, as the "Upper Kingdom" was in the south and the "Lower Kingdom" was in the north.[2] These "Two Lands" were represented by two distinct crowns – the "Red Crown" for the Lower Kingdom and the "White Crown" for the "Upper Kingdom" – each worn by their distinct rulers and worn as a "Double Crown" when both kingdoms were unified. It was during the "intermediate" periods that the country was divided into the two kingdoms, and these periods were often marked by political turmoil and a distinct drop in cultural production, such as art and architecture.

From as early as the Early Dynastic Period, the country was divided into smaller dominions along the river that modern scholars call "Nomes". The word "nome" comes from the ancient Greeks who, during the rule of the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty (332-30 BCE) in Egypt, referred to each as a kind of "pasturage" coming under the overarching rule of the Pharaoh of that kingdom. This made for a useful way of organising the inhabitants of the two kingdoms, but it causes problems when trying to define what version of a common myth is the "correct" or "most widely believed". The reason for this is that the myths, though they had some similarities, could diverge widely from nome to nome. That is why writers such as the ancient historian Plutarch chose to single out a particular version of a myth and record or study it alone.

Later scholars further subdivided these various types of myth according to

the cult center that either produced or ‘standardized” them.[3] They refer to them as “theologies,” such as the “Memphite Theology” (myths from Memphis) or the “Heliopolitan Theology” (myths from Heliopolis). There is the theory that these “theologies” were competing in some way with others from different cult centers. Shaw, however, takes the view that they were more alternatives than opposing theories and although each cult center would substitute a god from another nome for one of their own local deities, there wasn’t really any kind of animosity between the differing believers. Despite the fact that there was no externally enforced dogma over the whole of Egypt, the Egyptians still managed to maintain some overarching concepts. One such concept is that of the creation of the universe. Generally speaking, there was a limitless dark ocean of “chaos” called Nun, out of which a god was born who instigated creation.[4] The different cult centers felt at liberty to amend or augment that concept to incorporate local tastes and allegiances to deities. Later on, during the period of the New Kingdom, the cult center of Thebes gained prominence and the priests there tried to unify the earlier traditions of Egypt. In this attempt, Amun was the creator god but the Thebans also incorporated the traditions of the major cult centers like Hermopolis, Memphis and Heliopolis, which often seem quite disparate accounts to the modern reader but were quite ingeniously brought together at Thebes around 1200 BCE.[5]

The general creation story contains within it two aspects that are crucial to understanding all of the myths of ancient Egypt: *maat* and *isfet*. Isfet represents chaos or disorder, generally speaking, and it was seen as a fundamental element of everything in existence. There was no notion of trying to eradicate isfet from their general lives in ancient Egypt; after all, it was said to be one of the elements that was present in the limitless ocean at the dawn of creation. The only desire for ancient Egyptians was that isfet never became more prevalent than maat, its opposite: justice. Maat was often depicted as a goddess wearing a feather on her head, which was also the hieroglyph that represented her.[6] She, or simply the concept of justice, was believed to be present in all aspects of life and if it was broken by anyone, there would be a punishment. According to the Middle Kingdom “Coffin Text” it was believed that Atum, the “Great Finisher” of creation,[7] inhaled maat in order to gain his consciousness: “Inhale your daughter Maat [said Nun to Atum] and raise her to your nostril so that your consciousness may live. May they not be far from you, your daughter Maat and your son Shu,

whose name is “life” … it is your son Shu who will lift you up.”[8]

After that, Atum was capable of making the waters of Nun recede away from him, making him rise above them and become “what remained” or the “mound of creation.” It’s important to take note of the fact that there was no creation until Atum inhaled life and justice. Therefore without maat and her dualistic counterpart, there would have been no world, and that is the reason for maat and isfet’s ubiquity, as well as the acceptance of chaos in the world as seen by the ancient Egyptians. After Atum had separated himself from Nun, the children he kept inside, notably Shu and maat/isfet, often represented as a form of the goddess Tefnut, were now separated from their father, and Tefnut would go on to become the mother of all the gods.

The Recording of The Myths

Since each of the nomes had their own version of a given myth, collecting Egyptian myths into a definitive text was never possible. This has further exacerbated the mythologist’s job, since these stories have survived in disparate versions and media.

The myths may have arrived at the hands of scholars from inscriptions on pyramid walls (such as the Old Kingdom’s “Pyramid Texts”), painted on the inside of coffins (such as the Middle Kingdom’s “Coffin Texts”), or texts written on papyri (such as the famous “Book of the Dead,” which dates back to the Second Intermediate Period).[9] The mythologist’s job is made even more exacting by the fact that, since the scribes who documented the myths assumed their readers were knowledgeable about the stories” details, they opted to refer to myths obliquely out of a sense of decorum. This was often the case for Osiris, whose death was a troublesome topic for those inscribing on the funerary monuments since it was thought that simply mentioning his death could “magically harm the deceased.”[10]

Scenes from the Book of the Dead

The vast history of Egypt makes tracking the development of certain myths a complex process. In terms of the oldest description of death, modern scholars have the Pyramid Texts. These were initially inscribed on the walls of the 5th Dynasty pyramid of Unas at Saqqara,[11] and they documented and gave advice to the king on his journey into the afterlife. These inscriptions were later copied onto other pyramids from the Old Kingdom and have therefore survived in good condition.

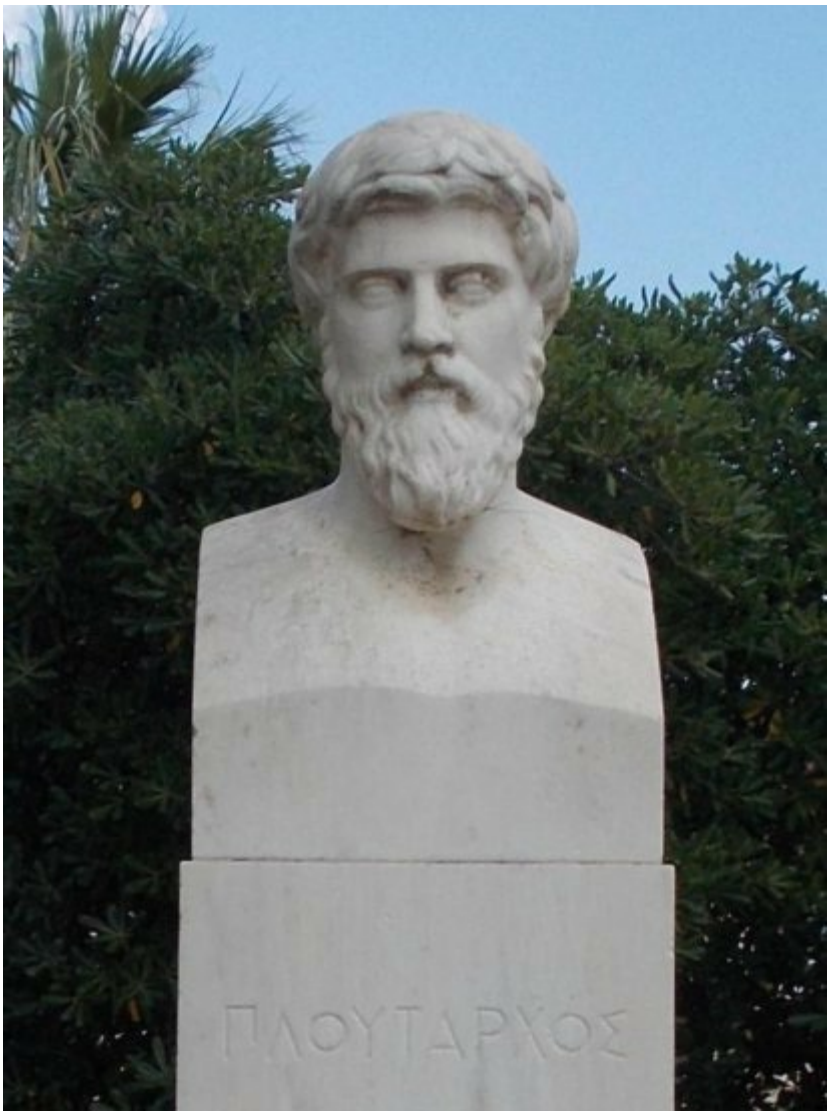
Unas Pyramid Text

Possibly the next most influential source came from the Roman era. Plutarch was a Greek historian and priest who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE. He traveled to Egypt, it seems, but once he arrived there he was incapable of reading any hieroglyphs, so he largely depended on conversations with the locals and also a smattering of earlier literature that speculated on the identity of Egyptian gods and compared them with the Greeks" own pantheon. For instance, to the ancient Greeks the god Amun was Zeus, and the same applied to Hermes and Thoth, Apollo and Horus, and Dionysus and Osiris. The connection between Greece and Egypt was an ancient one and continues to have an influence on modern readers since many of the cult centers of ancient Egypt are referred to by their ancient Greek names, such as Hermopolis the City of Hermes, rather than their ancient Egyptian names, most likely because of the troublesome nature of transliterating Egyptian words. Nevertheless, Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* is the fullest account of the key myth in Egyptian mythology and is the best-known version for modern scholarship too.[12]

Despite the fact that Plutarch's account is late in terms of the wider history of Egyptian mythology, it is a surprisingly accurate take on the formation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, dating back to around 600 years before his

arrival.[13] Of course, this does not make it an accurate account of the much earlier story of Osiris, but since describing his death and dismemberment was not a taboo for a Greek, his later account did not suffer from the obliqueness of the early sources.

Moreover, although Plutarch was not an Egyptian, he was an excellent scholar of foreign mythology. For him, the reason for writing down the myth of Isis and Osiris was to try and find a “fundamental truth” to the myths of both his own culture (of which he was a priest at Delphi for the remaining 30 years of his life) and that of his neighboring culture, which all Greeks considered to be much more ancient than their own. It was his scholarly approach and earnest desire to record the ‘truth” that makes his already interesting story worthy of study as a genuine account of the myth of Isis and Osiris.



A bust of Plutarch

The Gods as Concepts

Like in many polytheistic religious beliefs, the gods of ancient Egypt were neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, despite appearing in many locations simultaneously in some of the myths.[14] In fact, the ancient Egyptians used to worship the deity of the location they found themselves in, since each deity was more or less "present" in each part of the country. They were decidedly human in their relationships with each other. Just like the ancient Greek gods, they fought and argued, made love and married, and were ultimately capable of death, even if this meant that they would simply be reborn later on. Each god and goddess was "responsible" for an aspect of reality the ancient Egyptians encountered every day but, when they needed to, they could share their powers with another deity, which resulted in a kind of *merging* of the two. This was the case for the "dying sun god" who merged with Osiris so as to borrow his regenerative power and be "reborn" the following day.[15]

In the Memphite theology, the universe is created by the god Ptah, who "conceived the elements of creation in his heart and pronounced them into existence with the divine words as he pronounced their names." Yet some scholars believe that Ptah was only capable of such creation after he borrowed the heart and tongue from Amun, the ultimate creator; as such it was Ptah's being the personification of "creative process" that directed and guided Amun's creative abilities.[16]

When the deities merged or even appeared to take on the attributes of another god or goddess they were said to "literally become" the other deity. Shaw gives the example of Hathor attacking mankind with such a rage that she actually transformed into the bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet. It might be best to think of the deities of ancient Egypt as manifestations rather than distinct personalities with concrete biographies. As such they helped the ancient Egyptians describe the world around them and, by giving precedents in their myths, explain away the more confusing aspects of why the world is the way it is.[17]

In ancient Egyptian culture the duality of deities – most often manifested in their male/female relationships – was an integral aspect of the belief system. This duality appeared in Nun, the limitless ocean of potentiality out of which the universe was born. Within those waters, the male and female aspects appeared as frogs (males) and snakes (females). There were four couples, according to the beliefs at Hermopolis, making up the eight most important

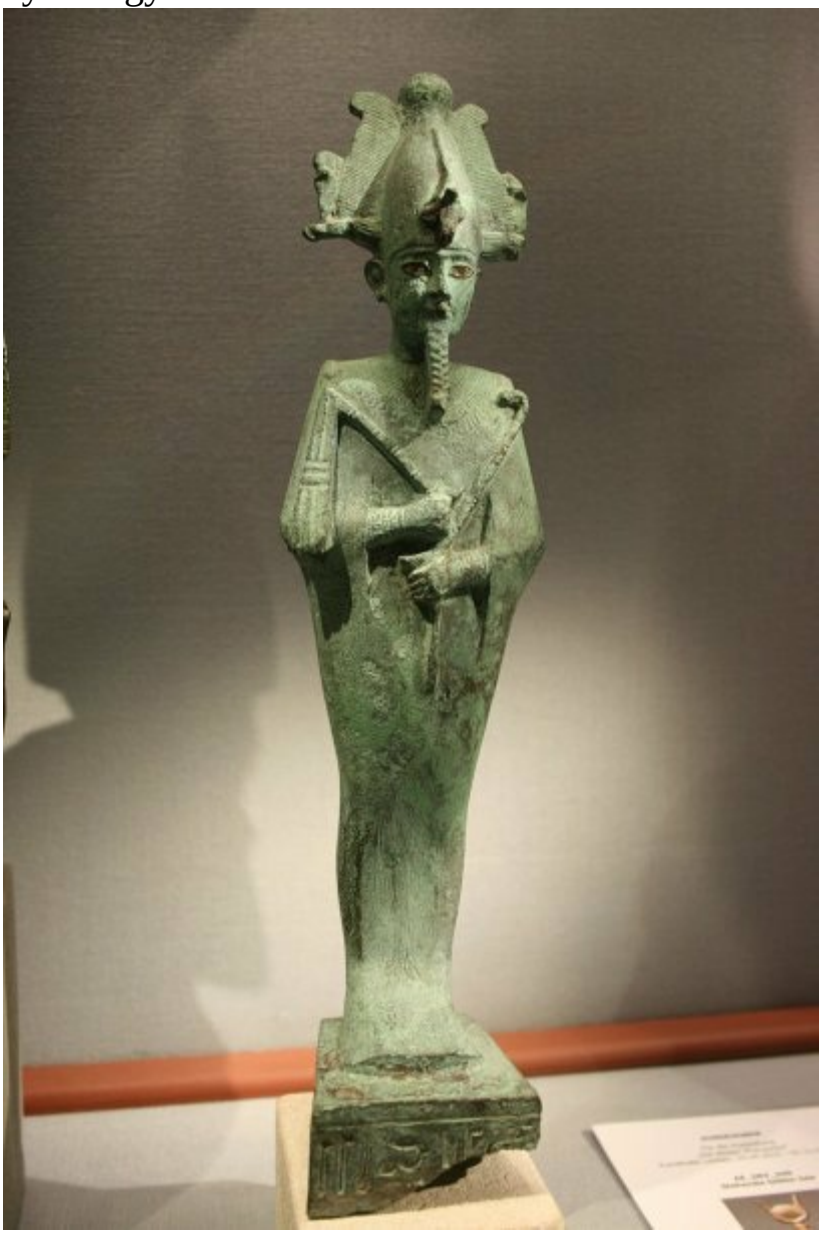
gods of “pre-creation” referred to at this cult center as the “Ogdoad”. Each of these gods and goddesses acquired names and, as a unit, they represented the earliest aspects of reality. Nun and Naunet represented the “limitless waters” out of which everything was created; Huh and Hauhet represented the concept of “infinity”; Kuk and Kauket represented “darkness,” and Amun and Amunet represented the concept of “hiddenness”.[18] Later assessments of the Ogdoad, certainly by the time of the Theban attempt at “unification,” emphasize the role of Amun in the creation of the first island and subsequently of the egg from which the sun god is hatched.

Atum’s children, Shu and Tefnut, were also both siblings and a couple at the same time but their separation from their father led to the separation between an “above” and “below” by Shu, which created all of the space in which life could appear and grow. Also, Shu represented *neheh*, which was the Egyptian concept of cyclical time, whereas his wife came to represent *djet*, which was the concept of ‘time at a standstill, covering everything that is remaining and lasting, such as mummies or stone architecture,” according to Gary Shaw.[19]

In the coupling of the gods, Osiris and Isis were one of the earliest to have established their incestuous relationship with an apparent “wooing in the womb.” Isis’s role as a wife and mother is unlike any other in Egyptian mythology. The story of Osiris’s death and resurrection is best read with Isis’s agency in mind too. She is not an idle mourner of her husband, nor is she the mere receptacle of a divine birth. She actively seeks out Osiris’s body, performing a magical ritual to acquire from the body enough of Osiris’s ‘seed” to conceive, and she even goes so far as to poison Re in order to learn his secret names and pass on their power to her child. Similar to Osiris, Isis is an instigator as much as a carer. If Osiris ensures the regeneration and rebirth of the sun, the dead and the crops beside the Nile, then none of those accomplishments would have been brought to fruition without Isis’s unwavering perseverance to resurrect her husband. She is no ordinary “Queen” in the medieval European sense, she was proactive and, as such, defined Osiris as much as he defined her.

Now that the basics of Egyptian beliefs have been presented, the myths will hopefully become a little clearer, or at very least more contextualised. The ability to use original texts is a luxury that is available to modern readers thanks to the passionate and untiring work of translators and scholars around the world, an enormous job that still has vast veins of knowledge to uncover,

and should not be forgotten when enjoying even the most cursory study of this beautiful mythology.



A statue of Osiris wearing an Atef-crown made of bronze

Statuettes of Osiris (middle) alongside Horus (left) and Isis (right)

The Red Land And Beyond

In Egyptian religious belief Seth was the god of the “Red Land,” the Egyptian name for the desert that lay either side of the Nile, which contrasted him with Isis’ son Horus, who was the god of the “Black Land,” that being the fertile soil in the Nile flood plains. This contrast is fairly common in Seth’s character. He was worshipped at his cult base at Ombos, in Egypt, but he was also strongly associated with all things “foreign.” More generally,

Seth was associated with all the dangers of the desert, such as sandstorms, wild animals and even the flash floods that appeared suddenly and often killed many.[20] He was called the Lord of Ombos and "chief god of the eastern desert," whereas, in the western desert, he was the "lord of oases" well into the Greco-Roman period.[21] Here Seth's polemic character is apparent in the fact that the desert was no doubt a source of much trepidation for would-be travelers, but at the same time the presence of an oasis would surely have been a cause for joy (after it was confirmed not to be a mirage, of course). Nevertheless, his association with foreigners did nothing to win him favor amongst most of the nomes in Egypt, which was traditionally a fairly isolated country.

The reason behind his association with foreignness is unclear, but one theory appears to shed some light on the conundrum. In the 17th century BCE, an invading force of people from the Near East known as the "Hyksos" took control of the Nile Delta and set up a capital at Avaris, where worship of Seth had prominence long before they arrived. The Canaanite Hyksos recognized in Seth certain attributes of their own chief deity Baal, and Geraldine Pinch believes that this invasion not only cemented Seth's association with "foreignness" but also led to the introduction of the worship of foreign gods, such as Seth's Canaanite wives Astarte and Anat, in Egypt.[22]

Even for the ancient Egyptians, Seth became associated with disorder, and although he was associated with the "wicked" aspects of confusion, violence and even "evil,"[23] this did not mean that he was a despised deity in the Egyptian pantheon. In fact, he was one of the nine principal deities known as the Ennead. Instead, it was in Seth's nature to question and disrupt the status quo and to try and upset the balance of maat and isfet; therefore his "wickedness" was seen as a necessary presence in the world, not one that needed to be eradicated entirely. Nevertheless, he was not supposed to be allowed to gain the upper hand against the forces of maat. Whenever the Egyptians weren't fighting amongst themselves they, although not often, did have to defend themselves from external forces and these conflicts inevitably came to be associated with Seth. As Geraldine Pinch put it, "the battles [the king at the large New Kingdom temple complexes] was shown fighting were sometimes real and sometimes imaginary, but the foreign enemies always represented the forces of chaos."[24]

In surviving artwork, Seth often appears as a strange animal with an elongated snout, tall rectangular ears and an erect tail;[25] but also as a human

with the same animal's head, a red ox, a desert oryx and commonly the hippopotamus. However, the most common depiction of Seth is that of a mysterious animal so strange that modern scholars have been unable to ascertain what the ancient scribes intended to depict. As a result, it has subsequently been referred to for many years as simply the "Seth (or "Set") Animal."

Whereas most gods had bones of silver, Seth's were of iron, connecting him with metallurgy in general but more importantly with the bellicose metal used later in warfare.[26] This bellicose nature came to define Seth in his contention against his nephew for the throne that he stole from his brother.

Seth and Osiris

In sources that date from the period after those of the Pyramid Texts, Seth's contrast with his brother is much starker than before. This is not an uncommon aspect of Egyptian mythology since Horus originally had a much more prominent role even than Osiris in the earliest periods. However, after the Pyramid Texts, Seth's role in the murder of Osiris is explicit.

Plutarch gives the fullest remaining account of Seth's dealings with his brother. In his work *On Isis and Osiris*, he tells the story of Osiris being the first to ascend the throne of Egypt, but, shortly afterwards, ßwanting to travel the world. So, Osiris took a contingent of men and set about warring, bringing culture to other peoples and establishing trade links that were present even in Plutarch's time.

> "During his absence the tradition is that Typhon [Seth] attempted nothing revolutionary because Isis, who was in control, was vigilant and alert; but when [Osiris] returned home [Seth] contrived a treacherous plot against him and formed a group of conspirators seventy-two in number.... [Seth], having secretly measured Osiris's body and having made ready a beautiful chest of corresponding size artistically ornamented, caused it to be brought into the room where the festivity was in progress. The company was much pleased at the sight of it and admired it greatly, whereupon [Seth] jestingly promised to present it to the man who should find the chest to be exactly his length when he lay down in it. They all tried it in turn, but no one fitted it; then Osiris got into it and lay down, and those who were in the plot ran to it and slammed down the lid, which they fastened by nails from the outside and also by using molten lead. Then they carried the chest

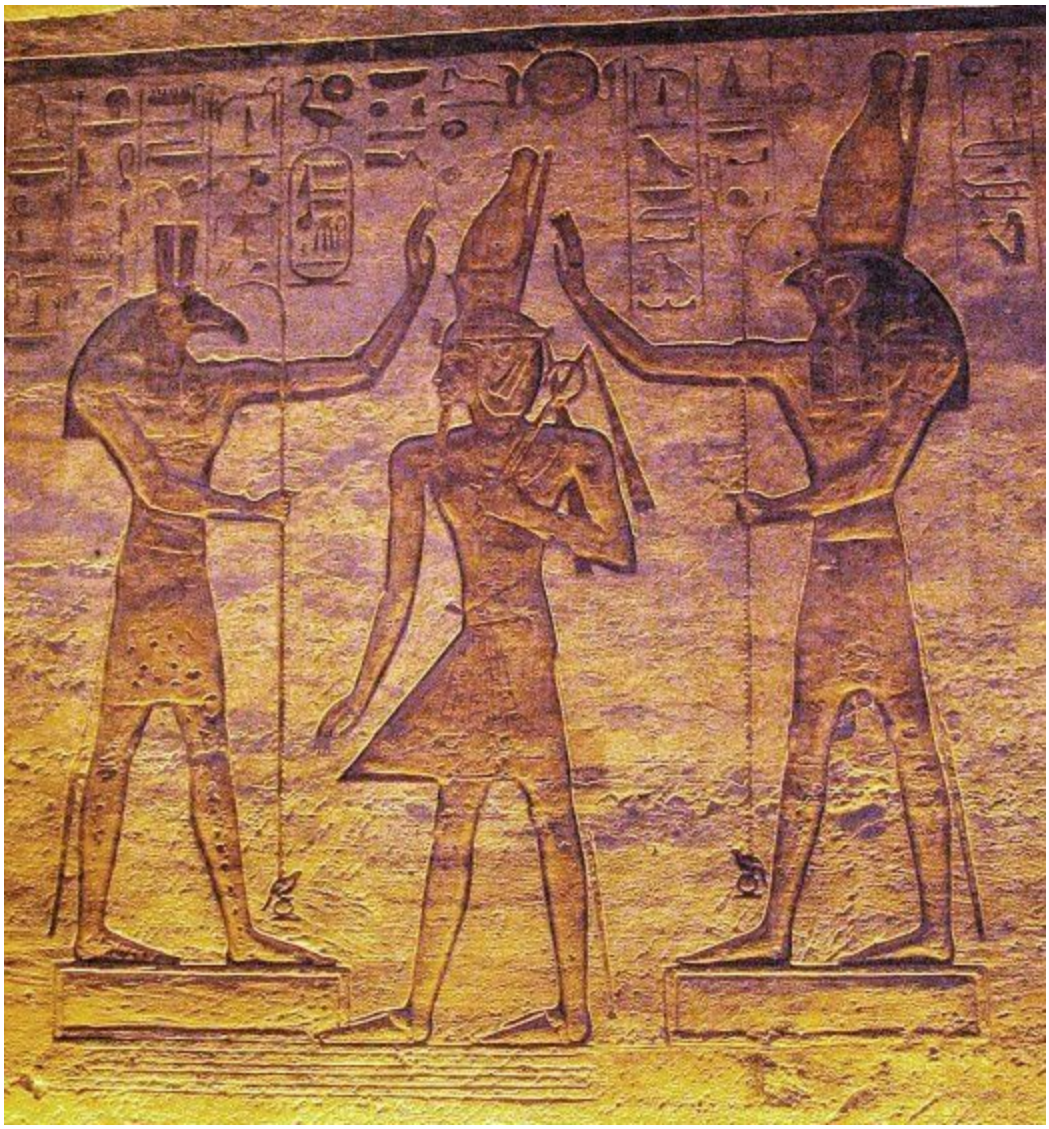
to the river and sent it on its way to the sea …’

“[Isis then followed rumor down the Nile until she discovered his husband’s dead body in its coffin lying amongst the heather rushes.] The heather in a short time ran up into a very beautiful and massive stock, and enfolded and embraced the chest with its growth and concealed it within its trunk. The king of the country admired the great size of the plant, and cut off the portion that enfolded the chest (which was now hidden from sight), and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house. These facts, they say, Isis ascertained by the divine inspiration of Rumour, and came to Byblus and sat down by a spring, all dejection and tears; she exchanged no word with anybody, save only that she welcomed the queen’s maidservants and treated them with great amiability, plaiting their hair for them Band imparting to their persons a wondrous fragrance from her own body. But when the queen observed her maidservants, a longing came upon her for the unknown woman and for such hairdressing and for a body fragrant with ambrosia. Thus it happened that Isis was sent for and became so intimate with the queen that the queen made her the nurse of her baby. They say that the king’s name was Malcander; the queen’s name some say was Astartê, others Saosis, and still others Nemanûs, which the Greeks would call Athenaïs …… but Typhon, who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it. Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts87 and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus. This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess.”[27]

It does not appear that Plutarch was entirely wrong about Seth’s real character in Egyptian mythology since, even in the earliest sources, his principal desire was to ascend the throne that once belonged to his brother. However, the early texts that hint at this story do so obliquely, mostly because many of them were written on the walls of tombs and there was a belief that such a story might harm the body of the mortal lying in wait for his or her divine journey.[28]

Regardless, the earliest accounts seem to suggest that the conflict between

Seth, Osiris and Horus was symbolic of the early formation and establishment of the patrilineal hereditary nature of kingship in Egypt. What's interesting is that Seth, who is characterized in these sources as being lascivious and incorrigible, resorts to murdering his brother and attempting to murder his nephew to attain the throne, yet his actions are treated with sober aplomb in the mythology. In fact, the "divine" royal line does not appear in any way "foretold" until after Seth is forced to face his fatherless nephew before a tribunal of all the gods, as told in the famous text The Contendings of Horus and Seth.



A depiction of Set and Horus adoring Ramesses the Great in a temple at Abu Simbel

Seth in a Matrilineal Society

An interesting cross-cultural similarity the story of Seth reveals is that of the difficult relationship between an uncle and his nephew in a matrilineal society. Although ancient Egypt was not, by the historical period at least, a matrilineal society, the importance of agriculture (more highly emphasized even than that of its neighbors in Greece and Rome) could suggest a change from matrilineal to patrilineal society in later times. Due to the antiquity of Egyptian civilization, this preeminent agricultural tradition, twinned with the consistent prominence of Isis throughout all the dynasties, could be a remnant of the religion of the agrarian peoples of the 9th and 8th millennia BCE. Although the dynastic lines became patrilineal, women continued to hold a prominent part in the royal structure, with female heirs apparent being more common than in many other cultures in the vicinity, which further suggests that the balance between males' and females' prominence in power was never completely in favour of the male.

In the early agrarian communities the goddess took primacy over the male deities since she was the symbol of fertility and the regenerative powers of the earth. In many modern western myths familial contention is often found between either the father and son – as seized upon by Sigmund Freud in his theory of the "Oedipus Complex" – or between brothers. However, in matrilineal societies, such as the Trobriand culture studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, the most contentious relationship in society was between a boy and his maternal uncle. In those societies, the maternal uncle is expected to defer to his nephew, but many of the myths present them as enemies whose ostensible relationship betrays the deeply harbored animosity they feel for each other. In the Trobriand society, "magic" is supposed to be passed between maternal uncle and nephew but he often does so unwillingly.[29]

In the case of the Contendings, the question of royal inheritance is ironed out through a series of "power plays" Seth inflicts on his nephew, which are constantly refuted and repelled by either the mother or Horus himself. In one of the early versions of the myth, Isis warns Horus not to let Seth penetrate him but instead to simulate the penetration, as he does, and trick his uncle into releasing his "magic" in a "non-dominating" manner. The essence of Horus' own magic – at least in iconographical terms – is the eye that his uncle gouges out and is then restored with even more magical potency thanks to the nourishing milk provided by Horus' wet nurse. Although these cultures are disparate in nature, the structural similarities in their myths are revelatory in the case of Horus and Seth.

The Solar Barque and Apophis

The story of the "Solar Barque" or the boat of Re, is one of the principal features of Egyptian mythology since it not only embodies the prominence Re held in the religious mindset but it also serves as a good example of the ancient Egyptian concept of cyclical time.

Ancient Egyptians believed that Re traversed the sky each day in a glorious barque equipped with a highly trained crew of deities that guaranteed its safe passage. Once the zenith had been reached, the barque would slip down the sky towards the West, where lay the dreaded entrance to the land of the dead, the Duat. At the horizon, Re and his crew would change into the "night boat" called the Mesketet. Although it still belonged to Re, and therefore was still the 'sun boat," the Mesketet was named as such because it was associated with "perishing" as Re was said to enter the land of the dead and die there (temporarily).[30] To the ancient Egyptians, the Duat was no blissful land of rest. It was a sprawling terrain that spanned the underworld from the West to the East and it was replete with dangers that threatened the re-emergence (and effective "re-birth") of Re and the sun that was the source of all life in the land of the living.

This kind of story is indicative of acclaimed mythologist G. S. Kirk's second definition of myth as an "operative, iterative or validatory" story, the type of which "[tended] to be repeated regularly on ritual or ceremonial occasions … to bring about a desirable continuity in nature or society."[31] It was the role of the priests to repeat this story each day, most probably with supporting rituals to aid its efficacy, so as to ensure the continuation of the cosmos. Naturally, this is not unique to Egyptian mythology but the role of Seth in its proceedings is particularly interesting.

The god of disorder and chaos boarded the Solar Barque each day and took a place of prominence on it at the bow. Alongside a cadre of other deities, including the sister he tormented and the nephew who would be his greatest adversary among the gods, Seth took up his scepter and an iron lance and embarked on the perilous journey. The surviving sources tell of a journey of 12 hours that involved the cadre of deities having to vanquish the enemies of Re and his boat with the help of a variety of divine aids, from fire-spitting cobras to the ancient god Aker "whose two sphinx-like heads face away from each other at either end of his flat body."[32] It is at the 7th hour, however, that the barque encounters its most formidable enemy, the great serpent Apophis.

Seth's connection with Apophis is an integral one to Egyptian mythology

and shows Seth to be more virtuous than he was later depicted. Seth was the strongest of the gods, and, as such, he had a prestigious place on the great "Solar Barque" that traversed the skies each day and contended with the perilous land of the dead, the Duat, at night. To the ancient Egyptians the rising of the sun was not a guaranteed phenomenon each day, and many of the spells and rituals recorded in the surviving literature attests to the fragility of the cosmos and the priests' role in maintaining it.[33] The Duat, although ruled by the benevolent Osiris, was seen as a land of dangerous monsters and demons and so the Solar Barque needed Seth at its prow to protect it.

The ancient Egyptians told the story of the progression of the Solar Barque through Duat by the hours of the night. Each hour was like an episode in the divine adventure and each episode had its gatekeeper and its challenges. At the 7th and 12th hours, however, the Solar Barque encountered its most feared monster of all: Apophis. Depending on the source, Apophis is either depicted as a great crocodile or, most commonly, as an enormous serpent. He was said to have been born from Neith's saliva while she was still in the eternal waters of Nun and, being a monster of discord, he began his life by trying unsuccessfully to swallow the eternal waters and stop the universe from coming into being at the onset.

Apophis is, essentially, the manifestation of chaos. He embodied the Egyptian concept of isfet in every action and appearance in the mythology. By trying to impede the Solar Barque on its natural journey, Apophis' role was that of interrupting the natural state of the universe, maat. The duality here is unmistakable but the earlier myths allow for a level of cognitive dissonance too. For instance, to the ancient Egyptians the snake was a symbol of protection and of rebirth and renewal but, in the case of Apophis, the symbol was flipped on its head in order to provide the gods with their ultimate adversary. This dissonance was not unique in this myth, however, as the role of Seth, Horus' and Osiris' great adversary, was also inverted since he was the champion of Re and the 'slayer of the enemy of Pre daily." It would seem that the ancient Egyptians were quite comfortable with this level of dissonance, or at least irregularity, in their myths but as time went on the lines became less blurred and Seth's and Apophis' roles came into starker contrast with the world of maat.

An Egyptian depiction of Seth spearing the serpent Apophis

A depiction of Ra, in the form of a cat, spearing Apophis

Vocabulary concerning Apophis had obvious repercussions outside of Egypt. Named the “Rebel” or the “Great Adversary” or even the “Evil One,” Apophis’ influence on later Christian ideas of their own “Adversary” is unmistakable. However, the ancient Greeks were no less influenced by this great snake, although the characters of Apophis and Seth became more intertwined. In Greco-Roman period Seth came to be associated with the very chaos beast he was known to the Egyptians as defeating.[34] When Plutarch was writing, he often used the name of Typhon to describe Seth, but Typhon/Python was the most fearsome serpentine monster of Greek mythology, not he that defeated it. Therein lies the confusion behind the nomenclature, since it was the Greek god Apollo who was associated with fighting Typhon, as related in the Homeric Hymn to that god:

> “And thereafter [Hera] never came to the bed of wise Zeus for a full year … But when the months and days were fulfilled and the seasons duly came on as the earth moved round, she bore one neither like the gods nor mortal men, fell, cruel Typhaon, to be a plague to men. Straightway large-eyed queenly Hera took him and bringing one evil thing to another such, gave him to the dragoness; and she received him. And this Typhon used to work great mischief among the famous tribes of men. Whosoever met the dragoness, the day of doom would sweep him away, until the lord Apollo, who deals death from afar, shot a strong arrow at her. Then she, rent with bitter pangs, lay drawing great gasps for breath and rolling about that place. An awful noise swelled up unspeakable as she writhed continually this way and that amid the wood: and so she left her life, breathing it forth in blood. Then Phoebus Apollo boasted over her:
>
> “Now rot here upon the soil that feeds man” You at least shall live no more to be a fell bane to men who eat the fruit of the all-nourishing earth, and who will bring hither perfect hecatombs. Against cruel death neither Typhoeus shall avail you nor ill-famed Chimera, but here shall the Earth and shining Hyperion make you rot.”
>
> “Thus said Phoebus, exulting over her: and darkness covered her eyes. And the holy strength of Helios made her rot away there; wherefore the place is now called Pytho, and men call the lord

> Apollo by another name, Pythian; because on that spot the power of piercing Helios made the monster rot away."[35]

When the ancient Greeks came into contact with the ancient Egyptians and learned of their mythology, they instantly saw the figure of Apollo in Horus, whose victory over his father's killer Seth (equated to Typhon/Python) was celebrated every year by driving wild asses over a precipice.[36] In the case of the Homeric Hymn, Typhon is defeated by Helios, the Greek god of the sun, and the "all-nourishing earth" that was integral to the Egyptian notion of maat was rid of its "bane" forever more. This story is of distinctly Greek design, rather than Egyptian. The merging of Seth and Apophis to produce the character of Typhon, as well as the lack of a cyclical battle between good and evil, are just two examples of why this is so. And yet there is another, euhemeristic theory that some scholars have pointed out to make sense of the Egyptian version too.

Interestingly, the Hyksos kings mentioned above who invaded and occupied the Nile Delta around the 17th century BCE included among themselves one king who went by the name of Apophis. As legend has it, King Apophis provoked the king at Thebes to fight a war that would ultimately result in the Hyksos people being driven out of Egypt by those from Thebes. It's not much of a legend, but what can be seen in this story is the mythologizing of a real-world conflict. The Hyksos people being driven out by kings of Thebes does not inspire much poetic or religious thinking, but it does when the conflict is represented as a battle between the forces of two distinct gods. Since the "foreigners" of the Nile Delta worshipped Seth (or, in this case the Canaanite occupiers worshipped his equivalent, Baal) and the forces of Thebes were known for their worship of Horus, the real-world battle became a symbolic battle between the two gods from their land.[37]

Curiously, there are some scholars who see an influence from the ancient Egyptian depictions of Seth and Apophis in a much later Christian myth. Due to the occasional depiction of Apophis as a crocodile-serpent hybrid, it has been suggested that Apophis was one of the precursors of the western dragon and Seth, wielding his iron lance and defeating the beast under foot, has been connected with that ubiquitous saint George of dragon-slaying fame. This would not be the only – nor the most far-fetched – influence Egyptian art and thought had on later Christianity, but it certainly is an emotive one that continues to be felt and utilised today.

The Contendings of Horus and Seth

After Horus had survived the difficulties of his childhood, he rose to manhood, full of determination to win back the throne that once belonged to his father. In the intervening years Seth had harassed Isis and her sister Nephthys often in order to eradicate his last remaining obstacle to the throne. Since Osiris had died and Isis had taken Horus into hiding, Seth had been ruling over a new kingdom of wickedness and disorder. Horus knew that his uncle would not give up the throne willingly so he appealed to the Universal Lord Re before the rest of the Ennead.

> [There came to pass] the adjudication of Horus and Seth, mysterious in (their) forms and mightiest of the princes and magnates who (ever) came into existence. Now it was a young [god] that was seated in the presence of the Universal Lord, claiming the office of his father Osiris, beautiful in (his) appearances, the [son of Pt]ah, who illumines [the west with] his [complex]ion, while Thoth was presenting the uninjured Eye to the great prince who is in Heliopolis. Then said Shu, the son of Re, in the presence of [Atum], the great [prince] who is in Heliopolis: "Justice is a possessor of power. [Administer] it by saying, “Award the office to [Horus].”"[38]
>
> At this Isis cried with joy and declared that justice had been delivered to the land of Egypt in the form of a new, just leader, Horus. Horus’ supporters within the Ennead echoed her cry but were cut short by Re who sat, incredulous before them on his divine throne.
>
> "Indeed, what is the meaning of your exercising authority alone by yourselves?"
>
> [Onuris] said: "He shall [assum]e the cartouche of Horus, and the White Crown shall be [placed] upon his head."
>
> The Universal Lord was silent a long [whi]le, [being] furious [at] this Ennead. Then Seth, the son of Nut, said: "Have him dismissed outside with me that I may let you see my hand(s) prevail (over) his hand(s) [in the pre]sence of the Ennead, since there is not known [any] (other) method [of] dispossessing him."
>
> Horus’ supporters, clearly fearing the ferocity and might of the incumbent king and what that wreaker of chaos might do to their beloved young god, protested loudly. Each gave reasons in support of “justice” and “divine right” to the throne, but the former was in

the hands of the Universal Lord and the latter was ambiguous. Who, after all, deserved the throne more: an inexperienced youth or the brother of the first king himself?

Then Atum, the great prince who is in Heliopolis, said: "Have Banebdjede, the great living god, [summon]ed that he may judge between the youths."

Banebdjede, the great god who resides in Sehel, and Ptah-Tatenen were brought before Atum, and he told them: "Judge between the two youths and stop them from being engaged so in quarreling every day."

Thereupon Banebdjede, the great living god, answered what he had said: "Do no have us exercise (our) authority ignorantly. Let a letter be sent to Neith the Great, the God's Mother. As for what she will say, we shall do it."

The Ennead said to Banebdjede, the great living god: "It is (already) a first time that they have been adjudged in the "One are the Truths" court."

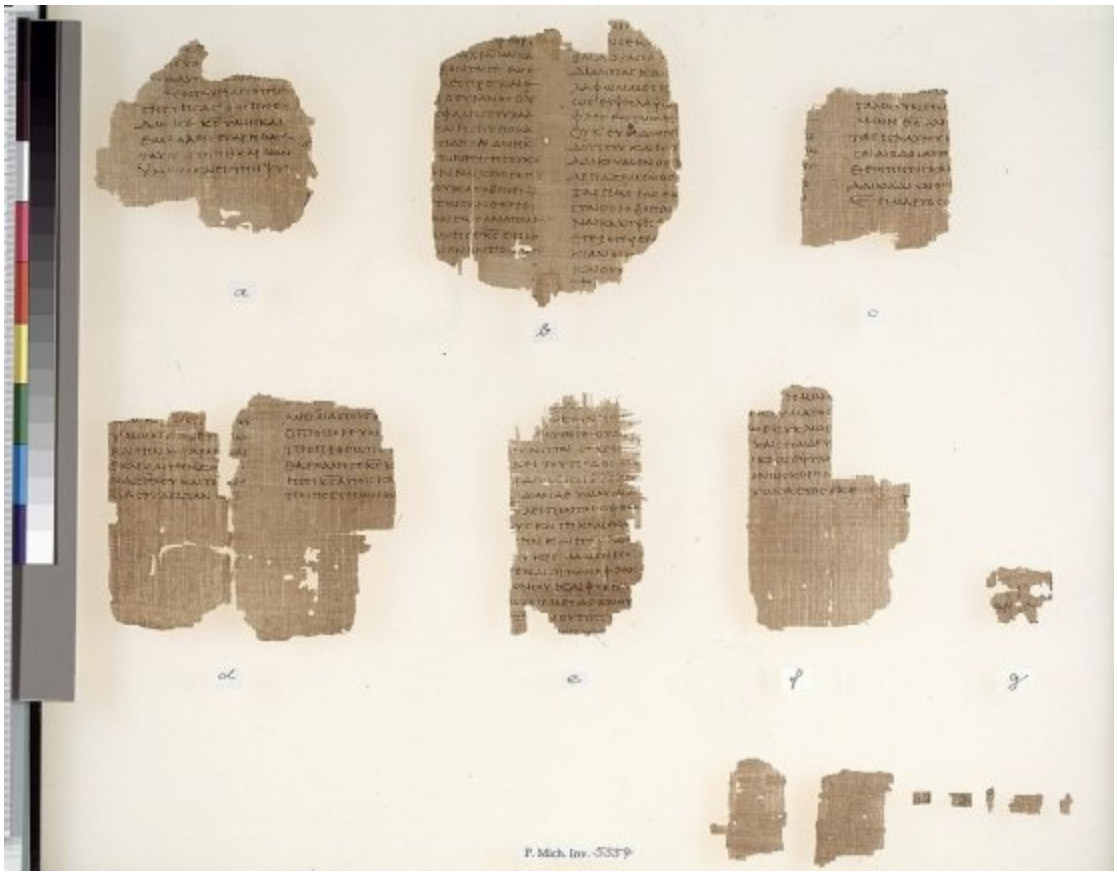
The Ennead could feel the dreaded stasis that would come to the land of Egypt, unless they could find some fair adjudicator to make a decision on the fate of the throne and so they implored the great god Thoth to take up his stylus and pen a letter to Nieth, the mother of Re, in the hope that she could give a definitive judgment.

Then he sat down to compose the letter and wrote: The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Re-Atum, beloved of Thoth, the Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, the solar disk that illumines the Two Lands with its hue, the Nile mighty in flooding, Re-Harakhti (while Neith the Great, the God's Mother, who illumined the first face, is alive, in health, and rejuvenated), the living manifestation of the Universal Lord, the Bull in Heliopolis, being the good King of Egypt. To wit: your humble servant, spend all night on Osiris's behalf consulting the Two Lands every day, while Sobek endures forever. What shall we do for these two individuals who for eighty years now have been in the tribunal, but neither of whom can be judged? Please write us what we should do.

Then Neith the Great, the God's Mother, sent a letter to the Ennead, saying: Award the office of Osiris to his son Horus. Don't

> commit such blatant acts of inequity which are illegal, or I shall become so furious that the sky will touch the ground. The Universal Lord, the Bull who resides in Heliopolis, ought to be told: Enrich Seth in his possessions. Give him Anath and Astarte, your two daughters, and install Horus in the position of his father Osiris.

Thus begins the famous Contendings of Horus and Seth. By Egyptian standards, the story is relatively modern, written sometime during the Twentieth Dynasty or the close of the 2nd millennium BCE. The most detailed and interesting source on the contest between Horus and Seth comes from the New Kingdom papyrus called the Beatty Papyrus I.[39] Joyce Tyldesley suggests the format of this rather laborious myth, which constantly resorts to authorities, would not have been laborious for the ancient Egyptians, who were used to the long drawn-out legal battles that often resulted in the same arguments being presented again and again without a guarantee of a resolution for either side. However, on a spiritual and sociological level, it was vital that Horus and Seth eventually arrive at a resolution after their battle. The Contendings not only tells the story of "good vanquishing evil," but also tells the story of how kingship was established in Egypt, or at least how it was believed to be established. It also spells out how the priestly and royal classes wished their subjects to believe it was established.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Pictures of the Beatty Papyri

There are various theories of how this myth came to be. One theory is that it was a memory of a real-world civil war. This kind of interpretation is known as euhemerism, and it involves taking the aspects of a myth and extrapolating real-world events from them, such as the two gods Horus and Seth – each representing a real-world pretender and his followers – battling to take on the throne and establish the patrilineal inheritance used henceforth.

An aspect of Seth that will become more prevalent as the story goes on is his lasciviousness. That he was the strongest of the gods was equated to his also being the most virulent and insatiable of them too. With this being the case, many modern readers may ask why Onuris, a supporter of Horus, might appeal to Banebdjedet, a god of carnal pleasure. This could suggest that the true wickedness of Seth had not yet been realized in the mind of the scribes documenting the Contendings, or it could have simply been that Banebdjedet's authority was believed to supersede his role as a "god of carnal pleasure," and the god's answer would suggest that this is the case. It's important to note that, even by this time, the gods were not the fully realized, three-dimensional characters that can be found in the much later Greek texts.

"Mother" is certainly a figure of prominence in Egyptian myth, and Isis' importance can be seen here when the gods resort to asking Re's mother, Nieth, after Re's choice to ask the "carnal god" backfires. This could be yet another remnant of the long-forgotten matrilineal past of ancient Egypt.

In other myths it seems that Seth did indeed receive both Astarte and Anath as his wives. These two goddesses were not Egyptian in origin. In fact, they were both were Canaanite goddesses and therefore foreigners, an important aspect of Seth to the Egyptians. Since many of the pairs of gods, particularly those of the earliest generations, either complemented each other or were actual mirror images of them, this brief mention in the Contendings would have spoken volumes to the ancient Egyptian listener. Seth's wives bolstered his role as "the other".

> The gods received Neith's letter and as Thoth read it out the entire Ennead agreed that Re's mother was correct in her judgment. Yet Re was not so easily moved. The Universal Lord could not allow himself to be contradicted in front of the other gods, least of all a group that had already showed their audacity once in defying their lord.
>
> Then the Universal Lord became furious at Horus and told him: "You are despicable in your person, and this office is too much for you, you lad, the flavour of whose mouth is (still) bad."
>
> Onuris became furious to the nth degree and so did the entire Ennead constituting the Council of the Thirty, l.p.h. Bebon, the god, got right up and told Pre-Harakhti: "Your shrine is vacant."
>
> Re was furious at the insults he received to his person and, since the Ennead were brazen enough to challenge his judgment, to his

authority also. At this he dismissed all the gods from the hall and lay on the floor ruminating on the injustice of the stalemate that he was incapable of breaking. Each of the gods returned to their huts and the day passed without any word from the furious lord.

“After a considerable while Hathor, Lady of the Southern Sycamore, came and stood before her father, the Universal Lord, and she exposed her vagina before his very eyes. Thereupon the great god laughed at her. Then he got right up and sat down with the Great Ennead. He said to Horus and Seth: "Speak concerning yourselves."

"As for me, I am Seth, greatest in virility among (the) Ennead, for I slay the opponent of Pre daily while I am at the prow of the Bark of the Millions, whereas not any (other) god is able to do it. I should receive the office of Osiris."

Then they said: "Seth, the son of Nut, is correct."

Onuris and Thoth let out a loud cry, saying: "Is it while a bodily son is still living that the office is to be awarded to a maternal uncle?"

Then said Banebdjede, the living great god: "Is it while Seth, his elder brother, is still living that the office is to be awarded to the (mere) lad?"

The Ennead let out a loud cry before the face of the Universal Lord and said to him: "What is the meaning of the words that you have said which are unfit to be heard?"

Said Horus, son of Isis: "It is no good, this cheating me in the presence of the Ennead and depriving me of the office of my father Osiris."

Thereupon Isis became furious at the Ennead and took an oath by (the) god in the presence of the Ennead as follows: "By my mother Neith, the goddess, and by Ptah-Tatenen, with lofty plumes, who curbs the horns of gods, these matters should be submitted before Atum, the great prince who is in Heliopolis, and also (before) Khepri, who resides in his bark."

And the Ennead said to her: "Don’t become angry. The rights will be given to the one who is in the right. All that you have said will be done."

Seth, the son of Nut, became furious at the Ennead when they

had said these words to Isis the Great, the God's Mother. So Seth said to them: "I shall take my scepter of 4,500 nemset-weight and kill one of you a day."

And then Seth took an oath by the Universal Lord, saying: "I shall not go to law in the tribunal while Isis is (still) in it."

The name "Pre-Harakhti" is one that shows one of the instances of two gods merging with each other to create another. The fascinating case here, however, is that Pre-Harakhti is the name Re takes on when he merges with Horus, wholly incongruent with Re's behavior in this myth. Re's refusal to accept the desires of Nieth, and the entire Ennead minus Seth for that matter, is an interesting depiction of a king being a tyrant here. Surely something the ancient Egyptians would have been able to sympathize with by the Twentieth Dynasty. In fact, this sympathy may be present in the comment "your shrine is vacant" spoken to Re. This seems to have been one of the harshest insults to dole out to a god, as it suggests that he had no worshippers. Having worshippers and not having bad breath were clearly part of the heavenly desires of this time.

The episode involving Hathor here may seem unseemly to the modern reader of this presumably religious text, but it doesn't appear to have been so for the ancients. In fact, this story is echoed in the Greek myth in which the goddess Baubo reveals her vagina to make Demeter laugh and put an end to the destruction she wrought after losing Persephone. Laughter, according to Lewis Hyde, is used in this case as a form of breaking the spell on an exceedingly bad mood, and it seems to have had the same effect in the case of Re.[40] According to the acclaimed mythologist Joseph Campbell, "humour is the touchstone of the truly mythological as distinct from the more literal-minded and sentimental theological mood …their entertaining myths transport the mind and spirit, not up to, but past [the gods], into the yonder void; from which perspective the more heavily freighted theological dogmas then appear to have been only pedagogical lures: their function, to cart the unadroit intellect away from its concrete clutter of facts and events to a comparatively rarefied zone, where, as a final boon, all existence … may at least be seen transmuted into the semblance of a lightly passing recurrent mere childhood dream of bliss and fright."[41] This is precisely what happens in the Contendings. The laughter breaks the "childhood dream of bliss and fright" and transforms "Re the stubborn and contentious" into "Re the open-minded judge" who will debate the issue soberly.

Seth’s mention of slaying “the enemy of Pre” each day from his position on the “Bark of the Millions” is a reference to Seth’s daily battle with Apophis, the fierce serpent of chaos that attacked Re’s solar barque as it traversed the land of the dead. Seth, for all his lasciviousness and “evil,” occupied the most prominent place on this barque and it was the might of his arm that secured its safe passage through the night and subsequent life-giving dawn the next day.

Seth’s weapon was a type of club or mace that was apparently one that only he was capable of lifting. Interestingly this does not have a connection with the hammer Mjölnir that belonged to Thor in Norse mythology, because in this case, other gods were capable of lifting it, and it was even stolen by the enemies of the gods, the giants, at one point. True to the idea of a weapon being so large and heavy, its bearer does appear, as Geraldine Pinch once said, to behave like a boorish brute in the Contendings, possessing more brawn than brains throughout the proceedings.[42] A euhemeristic reading of this episode could shed light on Seth’s actions as a remnant of the male god so exalted by the nomadic peoples overpowering the native female fertility goddess. This would not be such a wild interpretation, but it is interesting to note that, in the case of Egyptian mythology, the real-world goddess may not have ceded her position without a fight, as Isis’ mythical behavior might suggest.

> Nemty the ferryman received news of the unsuccessful tribunal as he approached the riverbank to retrieve the Ennead. He ferried them across to the Island in the Middle, for which he received his toll in gold from each, and he accepted and understood Seth’s message from Re that no woman was to be ferried across to the Island no matter who they were. The Ennead took their places in the shady part of the island where they feasted on bread and continued their debate without Horus’ pugnacious mother.
>
> “Then Isis came and approached Nemty, the ferryman, as he was sitting near his boat, after she had transformed herself into an old woman who walked with a hobble and (wore) a small golden signet-ring on her hand. She said to him: "It is in order that you might ferry (me) across to the Island in the Middle that I come to you, because it is for the young lad that I have come carrying this bowlful of porridge, since he has been tending some cattle on the Island in the Middle for five days now and is hungry."

He said to her: "I have been told not to ferry any woman across."

But she said to him: "It is with reference to Isis that you have been told this which you have (just) mentioned."

He said to her: "What will you give me in order that you may be ferried across to the Island in the Middle?"

Said Isis to him: "I will give you this cake."

He said to her: "What good is it to me, your cake? Is it in exchange for your cake that I should ferry you across to the Island in the Middle when I have been told not to ferry any woman across?"

Then she said to him: "I will give you the golden signet-ring which is on (my) hand."

And he said to her: "Hand over the golden signet-ring."

And she gave it to him. Then he ferried her across to the Island in the Middle."

On the island, Isis found the Ennead sitting together in relative peace but before any of them could see her she transformed herself into a beautiful maiden, knowing that the insatiable Seth wouldn't be able to resist trying to woo her once he caught sight of her. She was right, and Seth darted out from the divine company, overtook the disguised Isis and called to her from behind a tree.

He said to her: "I am here with you, beautiful maiden."

And she said to him: "Respect, my great lord. As for me, I was a wife (living) with a cattleman to whom I bore a son. My husband died, and the lad started tending his father's cattle. But then a stranger came and settled in my stable. He said thus in speaking to my son, "I shall beat you and confiscate your father's cattle and evict you," said he in speaking to him. Now it is my desire to have you afford him protection."

Thereupon Seth said to her: "Is it while the son of the male is still living that the cattle are to be given to the stranger?"

And so Isis transformed herself into a kite and flew up and perched on top of an acacia tree. She called to Seth and said to him: "Be ashamed of yourself. It is your own mouth that has said it. It is your own cleverness that has judged you. What comeback do you have now?"

Feeling ashamed and dejected Seth returned to Re/Pre-Harakhti who asked him why he was suddenly so sullen. Seth then recounted the conversation he had with ‘that tricky woman”.

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti said to him: "Now look here, it is you yourself that has judged your own self. What comeback do you have now?"

So Seth said to him: "Have Nemty, the ferryman, brought and severe punishment inflicted upon him, saying, “Why did you let her be ferried across?” So it shall be said to him."

Then Nemty, the ferryman, was brought before the Ennead, and the forepart of his feet removed. So Nemty abjured gold even to this day in the presence of the Great Ennead, saying: "Gold shall be because of me an abomination unto my city."

Then the Ennead ferried across to the western tract and sat down on the mountain.

The fully-realized, three-dimensional character of Isis is no “Mother Mary” personality here. There is no medieval sense of female propriety or piety, as Isis betrays the order of the “great god,” risks her life in the process, and applies the correct amount of pressure to Seth’s lustful weakness in order to make him admit his own wrongdoing. In this way, Isis successfully tricks the trickster. The pride of Re/Pre-Harakhti was made impossible to maintain thanks to Seth’s lack of mental agility, making Pinch correct in her judgment of Seth as being a dumb brute.

The story of Nemty’s punishment, that of removing his toes, may seem like a strange one, but it does have a certain mythological logic. Nemty’s animal form was that of a falcon, so cutting off his toes would have made it impossible for him to perch when he was in that form. Later on, one of the goddesses would cure Nemty’s toes, but not his aversion to gold and the dangers it could bring. A historian like the Greek mythographer Hesiod may have seen in this episode a moral story of the evils of monetary exchange. Hesiod, writing some 300 years after the scribe of the Contendings, saw all trade that wasn’t a “like-for-like” exchange of goods as a kind of theft. For Hesiod, who appears to have been involved directly or indirectly in agriculture, the monetary trade-for-profit activities of the sea-traders was nothing less than an immoral act of getting one over one’s equals.

When the gods returned from the Island in the Middle, both Re and the great god Atum wrote a letter to the Ennead and asked

them what they were doing sitting forlornly on the mountain. The two gods declared that Horus' right had been justified, much to Re's loathing, and that the White Crown had to be placed on the youth's head without delay. Seth, however, was livid. He had been tricked. Horus had not won the throne for himself through the might of his own hand, it had been won by the cunning of the pretender's mother. Seth rose when the letter was read out and he demanded that the White Crown be thrown into the river water so that he and Horus can battle for it. This seemed like a fair request to Re and he acquiesced, ordering Uncle and Nephew to take their positions in the water.

Then [Isis] fetched a skein of yarn. She fashioned a line, fetched a deben-weight's (worth) of copper, cast it in (the form of) a harpoon, tied the line to it, and hurled it into the water at the spot where Horus and Seth had submerged. But then the copper (barb) bit into the person of her son Horus. So Horus let out a loud shriek, saying: "Help me, mother Isis, my mother. Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am Horus, son of Isis."

Thereupon Isis let out a loud shriek and told (her) copper (barb): "Let go of him. See, it is my son Horus. He is my child."

So her copper (barb) let go of him.

Then she again hurled it back into the water, and it bit into the person of Seth. So Seth let out a loud shriek, saying: "What have I done against you, my sister Isis? Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am your maternal brother, Isis."

Then she felt exceedingly compassionate toward him. Thereupon Seth called to her, saying: "Do you prefer the stranger to (your) maternal brother Seth?"

So Isis appealed to her copper (barb), saying: "Let go of him. See, it is Isis's maternal brother whom you have bitten into."

Then the copper (barb) let go of him.

Horus, son of Isis, became furious at his mother Isis and went out with his face as fierce as an Upper Egyptian panther's, having his cleaver of 16 deben-weight in his hand. He removed the head of his mother Isis, put it in his arms, and ascended the mountain. Then Isis transformed herself into a statue of flint, which had no head.

Said pre-Harakhti to Thoth: "What is that which has arrived having no head?"

So Thoth told Pre-Harakhti: "My good lord, that is Isis the Great, the God's Mother, after Horus, her son, removed her head."

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti let out a loud cry and said to the Ennead: "Let us go and inflict severe punishment upon him."

Then the Ennead ascended those mountains in order to search for Horus, son of Isis.

Still smarting from the injustice doled out to him by the Ennead and even by his own mother, who had robbed him of the chance of winning the crown with the might of his own hand, the young Horus took himself off to relax under a shenusha tree in the western Red Lands of the desert. The Ennead searched the length and breadth of Egypt for the young pretender but it was Seth who spotted him first. Approaching him stealthily, the older god pounced on his nephew and in an instant gouged out his eyes and placed them on a mountain to "illuminate the earth". When the Ennead had exhausted the land in their search they reunited and asked Seth if he had had any luck finding Horus, to which Seth replied that he had not. Not believing Seth nor wanting to quit the search for her foster son, Hathor continued to leave no stone or grain of sand unturned until she found him.

Then Hathor, Mistress of the Southern Sycamore, set out, and she found Horus lying weeping in the desert. She captured a gazelle and milked it. She said to Horus: "Open your eye(s) so that I may put this milk in them."

Then he opened his eye(s) and she put the milk in them, putting some in the right one and putting some in the left one. She told him: "Open your eye(s)."

And he opened his eye(s). (She) looked at them and found that they were healed.

She set out to tell Pre-Harakhti: "(I) found Horus after Seth had deprived him of his eye(s), but I have restored him back (to health). See, he has returned."

Said the Ennead: "Let Horus and Seth be summoned in order that they may be judged."

Then they were brought before the Ennead. Said the Universal

Lord before the Great Ennead to Horus and Seth: "Go and obey what I tell you. You should eat and drink so that we may have (some) peace. Stop quarreling so every day on end."

Then Seth told Horus: "Come, let's make holiday in my house."

Horus told him: "I"ll do so, surely, I"ll do so, I"ll do so."

Now afterward, (at) evening time, bed was prepared for them, and they both lay down. But during the night, Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Then Horus placed his hands between his thighs and received Seth's semen. Horus went to tell his mother Isis: "Help me, Isis, my mother, come and see what Seth has done to me."

And he opened his hand(s) and let her see Seth's semen. She let out a loud shriek, seized the copper (knife), cut off his hand(s) that were [impure]. Then she fetched some fragrant ointment and applied it to Horus's phallus. She caused it to become stiff and inserted it into a pot, and caused his semen to flow down into it.

Holding her son's seed in her closed hand, Isis travelled to the gardener that tended Seth's lush crops and she asked him which vegetables the god ate from the garden. The gardener replied that his lascivious master touched none of the vegetables except the lettuces. When she heard this, Isis reached down and poured her son's semen onto a lettuce and travelled back to the tribunal of the Ennead.

Seth returned according to his daily habit and ate the lettuce, which he regularly ate. Thereupon he became pregnant with the semen of Horus. So Seth went to tell Horus: "Come, let's go and I may contend with you in the tribunal."

Horus told him: "I"ll do so, surely, I"ll do so, I"ll do so."

[Seth and Horus] both went to the tribunal and stood in the presence of the Great Ennead. They were told: "Speak concerning yourselves."

Said Seth: "Let me be awarded the office of Ruler, l.p.h., for as to Horus, the one who is standing (trial), I have performed the labor of a male against him."

The Ennead let out a load cry. They spewed and spat at Horus's face. Horus laughed at them. Horus then took an oath by god as follows: "All that Seth has said is false. Let Seth's semen be

summoned that we may see from where it answers, and my own be summoned that we may see from where it answers."

Then Thoth, lord of script and scribe of truth for the Ennead, put his hand on Horus's shoulder and said: "Come out, you semen of Seth."

And it answered him from the water in the interior of the marsh. Thoth put his hand on Seth's shoulder and said: "Come out, you semen of Horus."

Then it said to him: "Where shall I come from?"

Thoth said to it: "Come out from his ear."

Thereupon it said to him: "Is it from his ear that I should issue forth, seeing that I am divine seed?"

Then Thoth said to it: "Come out from the top of his head."

And it emerged as a golden solar disk upon Seth's head. Seth became exceeding furious and extended his hand(s) to seize the golden solar disk. Thoth took it away from him and placed it as a crown upon his (own) head. Then the Ennead said: "Horus is right, and Seth is wrong."

The eye of Horus, after it was restored to him, was called the Wedjat, and it was a powerful symbol that came to represent the very "restoration to wholeness" that Horus experienced when his eyes were restored.[43] The Wedjat was one of the most ubiquitous symbols – probably second only to that modern favorite, the ankh – in all Egyptian art, and certainly in the art of the dead and the tombs they were buried in. In this capacity, the Wedjat was used as an aid to the deceased, who needed to restore the disparate parts of their bodies after mummification. The Eye of Horus was often used in magical spells as a protective symbol for the deceased and the reciter, and it was worn on amulets too, supposedly to "fell the enemies of the wearer," just as its mythological bearer once felled the enemy of his father and of maat in general.

The Eye of Horus

A Wadjet amulet

The presence of dismemberment in myth is a common feature throughout the cultures of the world, and when the dismembered parts of the body are restored the myth takes on a deep psychoanalytical function for the believer. The single constant in human existence is the presence of death. The presence of a god, such as Horus or Osiris or Jesus Christ, who is capable of evading death through the restoration of his or her dismembered body (itself the symbol of temporality) provides the believer with hope in transcending their own mortality to divinity.

Trickster characters, such as the Norse Loki or the Native American Indian Coyote, often created certain aspects of the world in which the narrators of their stories lived. Admittedly, such “creation” was often unwitting, as was the case in the story of Loki fleeing from the gods after he had insulted them all during a feast. In that story Loki sat and ruminated on the ways in which the gods might try to capture him and, in doing so, happened upon the idea of tying cords together into a net to catch him in his form as a fish. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, the gods eventually used Loki’s own design to do exactly what he feared they would. In the Contendings, Seth is an unusual trickster, however, in that he – through his ambitious scheming – causes others to become “culture heroes” instead of him. His attempts to deceive or vanquish his enemies resulted in those very enemies creating cultural mainstays such as Isis’ papyrus boat – which the ancient Egyptians believed was immune to being attacked by crocodiles – and Horus’ boat made of pine, which was one of the few trees native to Egypt. These boats were always vulnerable to being scuttled by the ferocious hippopotamuses that lay idly in the Nile and so the connection between this real-life danger and the mythological danger of the god associated with the hippopotamus would have been a tangible reality for the ancient Egyptians.

In the case of the lettuce, to the ancient reader this would have also been a clear mythological trope of Seth since lettuce was believed to be an aphrodisiac in ancient Egypt and the insatiable god would have, of course, devoured lettuce alone amongst the other nutritious vegetables in his garden. So embedded was this belief in the libidinous potential of the lettuce that it was even depicted symbolically in ancient Egyptian art. That Seth was so easily tricked by Isis in her maiden form is indicative of his role as a sex-crazed fiend in this story.

> Seth became exceedingly furious and let out a loud shriek when they said: "Horus is right, and Seth is wrong."
>
> And so Seth took a great oath by (the) god as follows: "He shall not be awarded the office until he has been dismissed outside with me and we build for ourselves some stone ships and race each other. Now as for the one who shall prevail over his rival, he is to be awarded the office of Ruler."
>
> Then Horus built for himself a boat of pine, plastered it over with gypsum, and launched it into the water at evening time without anybody who was in the entire land having observed it. Seth saw

Horus’s boat and thought it was of stone. And he went to the mountain, cut off a mountaintop, and built for himself a boat of stone of 138 cubits. They embarked upon their ships in the presence of the Ennead. Then Seth’s boat sank in the water. So Seth transformed himself into a hippopotamus and scuttled Horus’s boat. Horus took his copper (harpoon) and hurled it at the person of Seth. Then the Ennead told him: "Don’t hurl it at him."

Horus obeyed the decree of the Ennead and he left his uncle to nurse his hurt pride. Horus sailed down the river to Sais to speak with Neith and remind her that he had bested his uncle again and again and surely now deserved the divine crown of Egypt. Neith was always on Seth’s side in the contention between him and his uncle and it dawned on her that there was still one deity that they had not yet called upon for judgment. Nieth called on Thoth and had him write to Osiris, son of Re and father of the pretender, so that he would offer a final judgment on the succession to his throne. When Osiris read the letter in the Duat, the western Land of the Dead, he replied immediately:

"Why should my son Horus be cheated when it was I that made you mighty and it was I (alone) who could create barley and emmer in order to sustain the gods as well as the cattle following the gods, whereas not any god or any goddess found himself (competent enough) to do it?"

When he read this Re replied scornfully saying that barley and emmer would have existed without Osiris’ presence and that his judgment was no more forceful or definitive than that of the rest of the Ennead. Osiris received the letter in his distant land and was furious with his father and all of the Ennead for taking so lightly the decree of the king. He took up his stylus and replied:

"It is exceedingly good, all that which you have done, O you who invented the Ennead as an accomplishment, although justice was allowed to sink down within the netherworld. Please look at the situation also on your part. As for the land in which I am, it is filled with savage-faced messengers who do not fear any god or (any) goddess. I have but to let them go forth, and they will fetch the heart of whoever commits misdeeds and they will be here with me. Indeed, what is the meaning of my happening to be here

resting in the west while you are all outside? Who among you is there that is mightier than I? But see, you have invented injustice as an accomplishment. When Ptah the Great, South of his Wall, Lord of Ankh-tawi, created the sky, isn't it so that he told the stars that are in it, "It is in the west where King Osiris is that you shall set every night?" (And he told me), "Now after (the manner of) gods, so patricians and commoners also shall go to rest in the place where you are." So he said to me."[44]

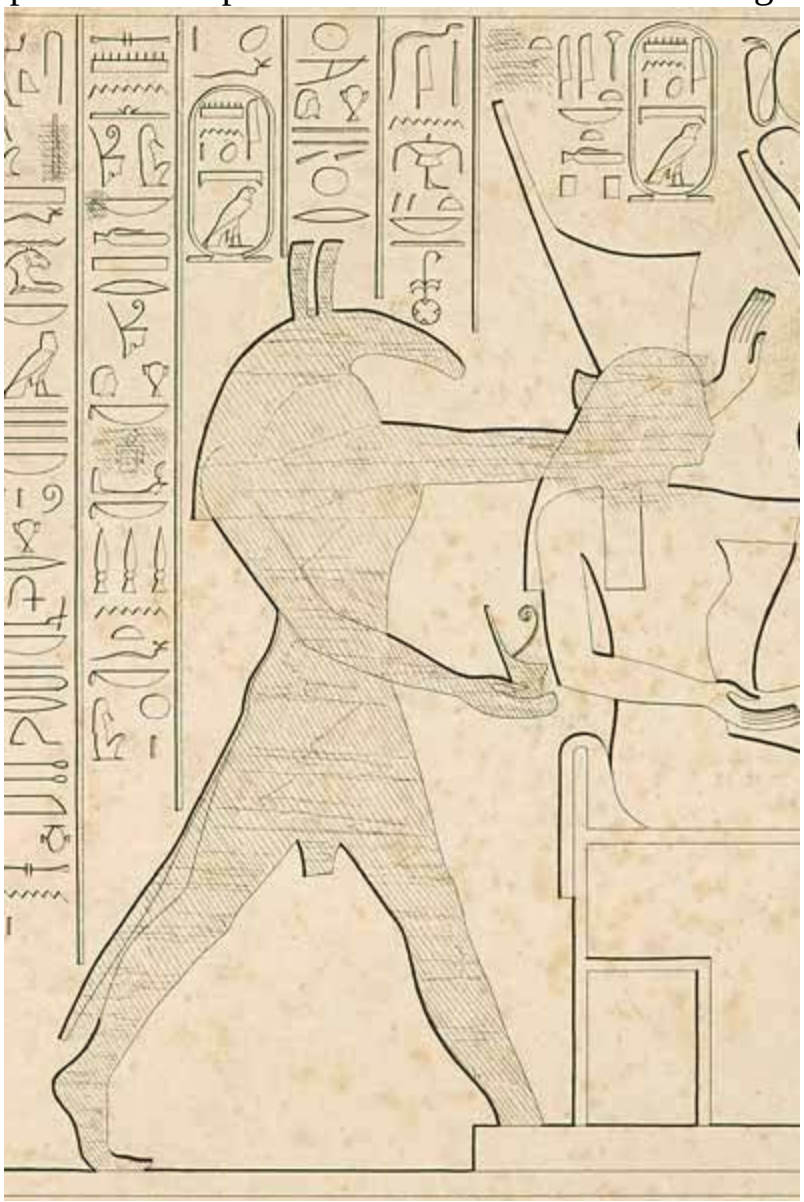
The threat was the final tiebreaker for the Ennead and Seth tried to fight Horus again, this time at the Island in the Middle. On the island Horus finally bested his uncle in combat and Seth was brought before the rest of the Ennead in manacles where he finally rescinded his claim to the throne, declaring his loyalty to the "rightful heir." Thereupon the Ennead crowned Horus, declared their own loyalty to him and Isis gave a "loud shriek" of delight at finally having been vindicated.

As the story goes, after he defeated his uncle, Horus ruled the two kingdoms of Egypt for 300 years. During that time he took revenge on all of Seth's followers, including those who supported him on the terrestrial level by burning down his temples and the towns that housed them. This part of the myth would coincide with the theory that the story is a memory of a real-world civil war, since after the ascension to the throne whoever won the contest would no doubt have tried to consolidate his power and eradicating the troublesome followers of his adversary would have been an effective, if bloody way of doing so.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the Contendings represented the beginning of their royal line of kings, so they included Horus and the gods in their list of real-world kings. They believed that after Horus, Thoth ruled the land of Egypt for 7,726 years, according to the dynastic reckoning, and that after him the living manifestation of Maat ascended to the throne. 11 vaguely named demigods then ruled for 7,714 years until the first human pharaohs ascended the throne as sitting Horuses, or followers of Horus,[45] awaiting the day of their coronation to receive the royal spirit – or ka – and the day of their death to join the rest of the gods in their celestial existence, in which they too were expected to board the Solar Barque and help defend the cosmos from the powers of chaos.[46]

The Solar Barque had Seth at its prow. Although he is presented as tricky

and certainly ruthless, Seth was not the enemy of the gods, as later Western philosophies would represent him. Royal art did glorify Horus the Uniter, but it also depicted Seth as tying together the heraldic plants of Upper and Lower Egypt.[47] This was not the case throughout Egypt, however, as depending on the artist and the area of Egypt where the narrative was displayed, the reconciliation of Horus and Seth could be considered impossible and the wise god Thoth was put in Seth's place as the binder of the two kingdoms.[48]



The depiction of Seth in a New Kingdom relief

From a more mythological perspective, the story represents the divine manifestation of justice and order overcoming the dangerous and unbridled virulence of chaos and isfet.[49] Some older versions of the myth have Horus

the Elder as its protagonist, fighting his brother Seth for the throne, and in these versions the story takes on the theme of a primeval and elemental myth, showing the celestial falcon battling the god of storms for supremacy in the world of mortals.[50]

The Contendings is particularly special since it not only gives a rare narration of a myth that most priests would have assumed too well-known to waste papyrus on, but also represents each god as having played their divine role and taking sides. In this respect the story reads more like a Greek myth than an Egyptian one, although its characters lack a little depth. In the story, Thoth performs his role as scribe by writing the formal letters to each of the gods. That the other gods reply immediately suggests that although the gods may have been capable of writing (itself considered a magical act), only Thoth was capable of creating the formal, sacred, non-inflammatory or emotional missives that informed the councils. Furthermore, Isis protects her son and her brother when she is appealed to, and Osiris reminds the living gods of his role in fertility and of his power to destroy them with the horrors of the Duat. Hathor the wet-nurse gives life by restoring the powerful with the milk she gains from a gazelle. Such a rare account of the gods enacting their roles led to the survival of this beloved story, and it is certainly the privilege of modern readers to have this insight into at least one ancient Egyptian view of the gods.

Conclusion

The character of Seth has no distinct moment in the history of Egypt where he became the villain in their stories. He continued to be worshipped at his historical religious centers until the Byzantine emperor Justinian the Great closed the Egyptian temples in the 6th century CE, and even after the scribes put ink to the Beatty Papyri towards the close of the 1st millennium BCE, he was venerated as the protector of Re and the defeater of chaos. It would be unwise to suggest that the modern tendency towards binary thinking of good and evil reflects the ancient Egyptian concept of duality in their cosmos. The cyclical nature of time, the constant deaths and rebirths of gods and humans, and the various religious perspectives that sprang out of the nomes along the Nile gave the ancient Egyptians the flexibility of thought to accept Seth's failings and still honor him as the strongest of the gods. There is much to be learned in this conflicting trickster even today.

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